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My Dissertation Healed Me: A Retrospective Analysis Through Heuristic Inquiry

Smita Kumar

Independent Researcher and Adjunct Faculty, smitak@gwmail.gwu.edu

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Abstract

It was my personal experience of intimate partner violence (IPV) that motivated me to undertake my dissertation, but during the process I was haunted by my "IPV survivor" identity. Little did I know that my intellectual pursuit was an invitation into personal healing through heuristic inquiry. During the data collection phase of my dissertation, I unconsciously embarked on the initial engagement phase of heuristic inquiry, but only 2 years after completing my dissertation did I realize I experienced six phases of Moustakas's (1990) heuristic inquiry. In this article, I share how my dissertation healed me through a retrospective analysis using heuristic inquiry. Through the coresearchers' narratives, I began the process of embracing my IPV survivor identity—analogous to Kintsugi, the Japanese art of joining broken pottery with gold to form a new version of it. Through this process, I have begun to acknowledge my resiliency and, most importantly, feel empowered to engage with others who have had similar experience, connecting to a collective voice of IPV survivors. Thus, I argue that heuristic inquiry not only transforms the researcher but also has a powerful impact on others (Moustakas, 1990), empowering coresearchers and communities. I conclude with a strong recommendation to foster research of personal experiences, as it has the potential to bridge the gap between theory and practice (hooks, 1994).

Keywords

Heuristic Inquiry, Healing, Dissertation, Intimate Partner Violence, Qualitative Research, Past Trauma

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Smita Kumar
Independent Research, Bokaro, India

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I had underestimated the power of research based on personal experience. It was only toward the end of my dissertation that it started to dawn on me that what had begun as an intellectual quest was a journey into my personal experience of intimate partner violence (IPV). I had listened to the research participants' narratives that were similar to mine, transcribed interviews that echoed my life experiences, and wrote about what was now our shared understanding of the phenomenon. I recall being deeply disturbed with the label of "survivor of IPV" during the data collection process of my dissertation, and I could not fathom why 12 years after divorce I was still trying to reject or hide from my past. Thus, what began as a nagging feeling to address my unresolved past trauma developed into engaging in a process similar to Clark Moustakas's heuristic inquiry. To this end, my dissertation participants helped me undertake this study, and after initial reluctance I found myself immersed in the topic of "IPV survivor" identity.

Early stages of the literature review depressed me, as I was overwhelmed with statistics and narratives on IPV. I became cynical after learning that decades of work on IPV had not eradicated it; rather, it had become a global epidemic (Alhabib, Nur, & Jones, 2010; Campbell, 1995; García-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2005), and stories from across the world were not very different. Further, having grown up as a middle-class woman, I was aware of the social stigma associated with domestic violence (Berg, 2014) but was unaware of its deep impact across factors such as race, location, culture, and economic independence. I was shocked to find the absence of middle-class women in IPV in the literature and the lack of studies on the role of work in empowering working women across class and race. Although I was skeptical about my research since my predecessors' insurmountable efforts had yet to bring

an end to this social evil, I was moved by the missing voice of middle-class women in IPV and decided to pursue this research.

As a doctoral student returning to school after 12 years of demanding corporate work, it was rather liberating to learn with no pressure to pursue a certain topic of research. I had the privilege to study in a multidisciplinary environment while focusing on a doctoral degree in human and organizational learning. I was determined to build depth and breadth of knowledge through diverse perspectives by taking courses across management, adult education, sociology, philosophy, psychology and women's studies. It was at a critical theory conference that I stumbled upon my dissertation topic, when the conference participants introduced themselves by sharing their personal story (of addiction, abuse, identity crisis, etc.). For some reason, after listening to my IPV background, the conference participants assumed I was studying my personal experience of IPV and cited examples of similar work. Thus, critical theorists and feminist scholars taught me that personal is political (Hanisch, 1970) and motivated me to study a phenomenon emerging out of my personal experience as a IPV survivor for whom paid work played a powerful role.

I faced significant resistance from academics who believed my study was too intimate to qualify as a dissertation topic or was better suited to a sociology or psychology department. In essence, there was considerable reluctance to support "intimate inquiry" (Laura, 2016, p. 220), or research driven by personal experience. Nonetheless, there were those who not only wholeheartedly supported my quest but were convinced of the impact and urgency of my study on IPV and work. My committee members and the works of eminent scholars continued to encourage me to pursue a study based on personal experience (Anderson, 2000; hooks, 1994; Moustakas, 1990) or trauma that has the power to guide and liberate others (hooks, 1994).

As I began my research, I had an intuition that this was going to be more than an intellectual pursuit; it was going to be a journey into my own life. Needless to say, I too had underestimated the power of work based on personal experience. A study based on personal experience requires revisiting past trauma, vulnerabilities, and unresolved issues (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). With trepidation, I embarked on the journey of my doctoral dissertation, and what unfolded was something I had not envisioned.

In this article, I share my journey of healing through my dissertation. I begin with a methodology section, where I provide an overview of hermeneutics, the approach I adopted for my dissertation, and heuristic inquiry, applicable to my healing journey and this article, to elucidate the significance of both methodologies in my research, as there are significant overlaps and one research approach (hermeneutics in the dissertation) triggered the other (heuristic inquiry). I then share themes of personal learning, followed by a creative synthesis of my story through coresearchers' narratives. I conclude with the significance of research based on personal life experiences. Participants are an integral part of knowledge production, both in hermeneutics (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000) and heuristic (Moustakas, 1990) methodologies, and hence they are referred to as coresearchers.

Research Methodology

My dissertation question was aimed at understanding how middle-class women in IPV relationships describe and understand the role of work in the process of empowerment, and I adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach for this inquiry. The findings of my dissertation can be found in another article (Kumar & Casey, 2017). van Manen (1990) described hermeneutic phenomenology as "a philosophy of the personal, the individual, which we pursue against the background of an understanding of the evasive character of the logos of other, the whole, the communal, or the social" (p. 7). I was confident in my choice of hermeneutic phenomenology, as it considers individual experience as a whole and not in parts,

which allows researchers to explore meaning and to avoid explanation (Heidegger, 1967; Moustakas, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology considers individuals (the researcher and coresearchers) as embedded in the study with their social, cultural, and historical contexts (Gadamer, 1991; Laverty, 2003) and allows the researcher and coresearchers to co-construct meaning through their individual experiences, creating a new understanding of their worlds and shared experiences. To this end, my having undergone an experience similar to that of the coresearchers was extremely relevant to the hermeneutic approach, which requires the researcher to have a deep understanding of the philosophical underpinning of the phenomenon, as well as maturity and self-awareness (Gadamer, 1991). Further, hermeneutic phenomenology differs from phenomenology in general as it requires a conscious understanding by the researcher and coresearchers about their histories, philosophies, and how they interpret these experiences. Phenomenology writ large, by contrast, focuses primarily on understanding what constitutes individuals' lived experiences and how they make meaning of those experiences (Laverty, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1989). Also, this stands in contrast with transcendental phenomenology, which requires researchers to remove or bracket every assumption or prior understanding of the phenomenon to make meaning and understand the essence through intuition and self-reflection (Moustakas, 1994).

My preunderstanding or subjectivity statement became the starting point of the research, as the researcher is situated in the study (Gadamer, 1991). I conducted two rounds of semistructured interviews with 10 middle-class U.S. women coresearchers, who were purposively selected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) based on criteria that focused on women who experienced IPV and recognized the significant role of work in leaving their abusive relationships. I applied an open coding method using a computer software program, Atlas.ti. Finally, I adopted Paul Ricoeur's (1981) process of data analysis, which involves intertwined phases of seeking meaning, theme analysis, and interpretation with reflection. Through dialogue, the coresearchers and I co-constructed the meaning of our individual experiences of IPV and empowerment through work. Consequently, we arrived at a new knowledge of the process of empowerment, where we changed our prior assumptions of the phenomenon (Munhall, 1989) and gained a deeper, novel understanding of ourselves, unthinkable prior to the inquiry.

Heuristic Inquiry: A Retrospective Analysis

Towards the end of my dissertation, it started to dawn on me that what had begun as an intellectual quest was a journey into my personal experience of IPV. It was during the data collection phase of my dissertation that I unconsciously engaged in heuristic self-inquiry (Sela-Smith, 2002), which followed Moustakas's (1990) six stages of heuristic inquiry and lasted for over 2 years.

I had listened to narratives similar to mine, transcribed interviews that echoed my life experiences, and wrote about what was now our understanding of the phenomenon. Although I maintained a journal throughout the dissertation period and used it extensively to capture thoughts, reactions, perceptions, and feelings during the data analysis and interpretation processes (Heidegger, 1967), deep reflection on my personal trauma began during and after the dissertation writing phase. It was when I was no longer actively working on my dissertation that I unknowingly deeply indulged in my journey. To me, it was addressing a personal matter and not engaging in a study (Sela-Smith, 2002). In essence, I was not done with my research, or maybe another study was in waiting. I started to uncover the layers of my trauma that I was unaware of. Thus, what began as a nagging feeling to address my unresolved past trauma of "IPV survivor" identity emerged as Clark Moustakas's heuristic inquiry (Sela-Smith, 2002). Heuristic inquiry is a process of reflective learning to uncover a phenomenon that arises from

a deeply personal experience (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985) and has the power to transform the researcher (Moustakas, 1990). As researchers explore and understand the essence of a phenomenon emanating from their individual lives, it connects to others, or the universe, to "create meaningful order from the complexity that accompanies questions" (Kenny, 2012, p. 11). I did not see this as research, as all I did was surrender to the process of self-exploration (Moustakas, 1990). No research process was guiding me; my intuition took over the entire process. In heuristic inquiry, both surrender and intuition are critical to the process of discovery, without which real transformation is unlikely (Moustakas, 1990).

During my dissertation, I had sleepless nights wondering if I had selected the wrong methodology and instead should have adopted heuristic inquiry. Heuristic inquiry is an approach to thinking and exploring where the researcher becomes one with the question of study (Kenny, 2012), once the researcher is ready. In retrospect, I feel that undertaking heuristic inquiry 4 years earlier may have been overwhelming, as I was not ready to be the center of my study, to reexamine the unresolved aspects of my past and have my identity ripped apart (for reconstruction) through an inquiry into my "survivor (of IPV) identity." I was not ready to surrender to the process that is the essence of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). Heuristic inquiry is similar to autoethnography, as both methodologies have the researcher's experience and reflexivity at the core of the process (Patton, 2002).

Six Stages of Heuristic Inquiry

To uncover tacit knowledge, self-dialogue and intuition are critical in heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). The researcher, who is also the participant, engages in self-dialogue to get deeper into the personal question and remains open to intuition to connect with tacit knowledge, the root of the problem or inquiry (Sela-Smith, 2002). This is followed by the six stages of heuristic inquiry—*initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis*—which require the researcher to "remain internally focused and dwell within the feelings of the tacit dimension, allowing the six phases to unfold naturally by surrendering" to the self inquiry (p. 63). As Moustakas (1990) articulated, the focus is not on the entry into each phase or its completion, but on being open to the emotions that lead the researcher into self-awareness, deeper understanding, growth, and eventually personal transformation.

Initial engagement is a phase when the researcher consciously or unconsciously identifies a problem that is personal and compelling enough that creates dissonance in the researcher's life. This phase leads the researcher to engage in an inquiry to gain a deeper awareness into self and the problem. *Immersion,* the second phase, is intertwined with the first phase, when the researcher is constantly living the problem, surrendering to the process and becoming one with the question or problem. Sela-Smith (2002) posited that if the researcher is not completely immersed in the inquiry, it "will lack integrity . . . and [the researcher] will not be able to live the question in his or her waking, sleeping and dreaming" (p. 66). There was no clear indication when I entered into these first two stages. However, I do recall being disturbed with the label of "survivor of IPV" during the data collection phase of my dissertation and in conversations with committee members describing the coresearchers. Throughout my transcription and writing phase, that word choice kept bothering me, and I was still trying to reject or hide from my past. I felt disillusioned and depressed that years of therapy and healing had not helped me accept my past and I still wanted to wish away my experiences of abuse and violence. For months I engaged in *self-dialogue* (Moustakas, 1990), trying to examine and question my discomfort with being an "IPV survivor." I could not fathom the irritation I felt with that identity. While I was puzzled with my reactions, at the same time I was reluctant to go within for the fear of discovering the unknown. I had several excuses to avoid this process: Will I have time to enter into a self-exploration process while writing my dissertation? Isn't

this best done with a counselor? Have I simply become oversensitive with the phrase "IPV survivor"? Nonetheless, the questioning continued and somewhere I knew it was time to face my past that I had kept neatly locked inside for over a decade.

Incubation, the third phase, began when I had completed my dissertation. In this phase the researcher moves away from the topic of inquiry and may consciously detach from it. It is an unconscious process in which the "inner workings of the tacit dimension and intuition continue to clarify and extend understanding on levels outside the immediate awareness" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 29). I was exhausted with my dissertation, felt disturbed with the "IPV survivor" identity, and wanted to forget everything about it. I even disengaged with those who would bring up any discussion of my dissertation. In addition, my backache, due to months of sitting and writing, warranted me indulging in much-needed self-care. Consequently, I was forced to rest and "retreat . . . from the intense, concentrated focus on the question" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28). Instead, I was occupied with therapeutic practices such as yoga, mindfulness, and physical therapy. My spirituality is a strong part of my identity, and teaching yoga only reinforces and strengthens it. Being immersed in yoga practice and teaching allowed me to practice mindfulness and watch the rise and fall of my emotions. This distance was a necessary change that brought space into the process—space for intuition, openness, and receptivity. Such "right-brain activities" emerge when we are relaxed, with free time and space (Anderson, 2000, p. 38). With this space, I moved into the next phase of illumination.

The *illumination* phase largely works by itself, when we have new realizations and experience the moment of sudden insights that we cannot plan for (Sela-Smith, 2002). The new realizations appear spontaneously, leading to transformation in the way the researcher views self and the world (p. 68). It is in this phase that "the researcher experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9). In the illumination phase, I became aware of feelings that I was unaware of or had dissociated from. The distance from the incubation phase gave me strength to reengage with the coresearchers' narratives. While writing academic papers for journals, I began to revisit these narratives. I needed courage to face them, as I was overwhelmed with the painful past experiences of the coresearchers. Yet, as I reread the narratives, I became curious and strong. It felt like a different experience: I was seeing new patterns, and my life story was coming together through these narratives in a new light. I was seeing insights and patterns that I never associated with and was beginning to get a glimpse into a new self. For the first time in over a decade, I was seeing beyond the pain and suffering of a survivor; I was seeing anger, strength, resilience, and other emotions. At first, it was tempting to ignore this new knowing, as it meant letting go of my old patterns, beliefs, and identity. It was very unsettling to let go of something that had been my identity for over a decade. But just as when one wakes up, one cannot pretend to believe in the reality of the dream, once I was aware I had to let go of the past.

Explication is the phase when the researcher begins to examine, understand, and share the newfound awareness of the initial inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). This effort occurs through focusing, indwelling, self-exploration, and self-disclosure. It was interesting to observe different feelings and beliefs about IPV relationships that had led me to dissociate from that identity. I was beginning to see new themes and patterns —isolation, shame and guilt of being an IPV victim, anger and humiliation of being abused, acknowledgement of resilience, life after IPV, and community work and IPV—and how these impacted my understanding of the phenomenon. In this phase, I was deliberately examining the themes to gain deeper understanding and to uncover tacit knowledge, which enabled me to see "the complete picture of the phenomenon" (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010, p. 1578). It was new for me to recognize feelings of humiliation and shame. At the same time, I was ready to "acknowledge resiliency" and "commit to community work after IPV," which before I had rejected. It was beginning to dawn on me that by rejecting the "IPV survivor" identity, I was keeping myself away from

other survivors of IPV or those still in abusive relationships. As with transformative learning, I was experiencing change in my frame of reference that was the basis for my beliefs, behaviors, and actions (Mezirow, 1991) regarding IPV.

Having been a potter, it dawned on me that just as Kintsugi, the Japanese art of pottery that takes broken pieces and aesthetically glues them together using gold (Gopnik, 2009), I was beginning to integrate my past experiences. In Kintsugi, the potter keeps the damage as an integral part of its history and what emerges is more aesthetically appealing than the original piece. Similarly, I was accepting my survivor identity as an integral part of my identity and becoming ready for the emergence of a new identity. Furthermore, I was beginning to see that my IPV survivor identity was extending beyond my personal domain into research, social work, and other aspects of my life.

During the *illumination* phase, several themes and patterns emerged to better explain the IPV survivor identity; however, as I deliberated and examined them, some patterns and themes merged, some formed into something new, while others seemed redundant (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). It was an interesting phase that energized me (after the detached and quiet *incubation* phase), helping me connect to the women survivors of IPV and eventually reconnecting to the larger purpose of this issue. It has been 2 years since this process began, and finally I feel ready to share my new awareness. In the following section, I present the themes that emerged during the *illumination* phase and crystallized into the four themes in the *explication* phase: emerging out of isolation, facing unresolved issues, acknowledging resilience, and committing to community work.

Four Themes from My Learning

Emerging out of Isolation

With exposure to qualitative research and prior experience with psychotherapy, I was aware that I ran the risk of projecting my emotions onto my coresearchers or internalizing their emotions. As a result, I enrolled in a counseling program and consciously practiced mindfulness during my research interviews for greater awareness of my emotions. Also, I shared my IPV background with all the coresearchers and expressed my willingness to speak about our shared experiences during the interview. To my surprise, all coresearchers and I shared more than we had planned, disclosing very intimate and private emotions of our IPV experiences. Thus, working on emotionally sensitive topics similar to my past experience exposed me to emotions beyond my conceptualization. Similar to the coresearchers in IPV relationships, I had carried my feelings of shame, guilt, and loneliness and wanted to hide from the world (and self). Nonetheless, speaking to coresearchers introduced me to a new world of camaraderie based on shared pain, shame, guilt, and shared secrets. I was moved when a 65-year-old grandmother of three said, “It is today after 40 years that I feel I was not alone! Even you had had similar experience.” For a long time, we sat in silence, holding hands and just being present. It is believed that when we listen to another’s past, we become witness to it (Brant, 1994), walking with them to their past and reducing their isolation. This process of listening with love is “validating the existence of [their] stories, . . . to protect their places in the world” (Laura, 2016, p. 219). We both had walked with each other to our painfully dark past, thus reducing our feeling of isolation. I was overwhelmed with feelings of trust, humility, and the responsibility entrusted upon me when coresearchers shared their traumatic life experiences. Kiara said, “You are the only one who knows what really happened; I didn’t even share it with my counselor.” Till this day, I am amazed at the special bond and immense trust created in the coresearcher and researcher relationship.

Facing Unresolved Issues

I have been fundamentally fearful of counseling because I am aware of coming face-to-face with my real issues and having to assume responsibility for my life story. This fear stems from the realization that there is work to be done, even for issues I thought were resolved. However, I underestimated the power of this research and how it could make me confront unresolved issues or discover new ones. Listening to coresearchers' anger towards their ex-partners or husbands was overwhelming. For example, Melissa said, "I hate saying his name," and while Florencia found that her deep religious faith could not help after four decades, she added, "[But] I just couldn't not forgive. . . . You have to forgive." To my disbelief, for the very first time, I was staring at this deep-rooted anger against my ex-husband. I was shocked because I never knew about my anger towards him; I was familiar with my fear, pain, and sadness but had never acknowledged my anger. I was angry with my ex-husband for disrespecting and violating me on a physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual level, and I was angry at myself for never acknowledging it or even sharing it with him.

After my initial reaction of dismay—How did I never know about my anger?—I began to gain a new understanding of my anger from multiple perspectives. I realized that throughout my childhood, I learned that anger is not a good emotion to have, especially for girls. This stems from childhood socialization where girls are expected to display emotions such as sadness, shame, or guilt (Brody & Hall, 2008). It is entirely acceptable to hide our anger behind tears—probably because sadness is perceived as less threatening and is easily associated with females. All along I believed I was beyond such childhood socialization norms, but I was no different. "I had let myself down." Once again, this is another example of how deep rooted our childhood conditioning is; it was easier for me to feel guilt than anger towards society or my family!

After being introduced to my anger, I simply watched it for days. This process provided me with several insights. First, I recognized that I was so scared of my ex-husband that I could never fathom being angry, let alone displaying anger. Hence, I had unknowingly emotionally dissociated from my feeling of anger, largely for self-preservation (Spiegel, Hunt, & Dondershine, 1988) from yet another incident of abuse. In acknowledging my anger for the first time, I was learning that it is not easy "to name our pain," but that labeling it is healing in itself (hooks, 1994, p. 74). Facing my old fears gave me a new frame to view my past; it gave me a new knowing of my past trauma (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). Once again, my spiritual practice allowed me the space to acknowledge and accept my emotions of fear and anger.

One of the most powerful incidents of healing I experienced through this process came after I decided not to pour out my anger in a letter to my ex-husband but to meditate on my anger and release it. Two months after this process, I received an apology from my ex-husband—without any communication or prompt from anyone. It was on what would have been our 15th wedding anniversary. Tears rolled down my face as I read the note: "I am sorry for hurting you!"

Acknowledging Resilience

Many assume that those with traumatic past experiences are weak and fail to see their perseverance, determination, and will to live. All coresearchers displayed resiliency, restarting their lives after leaving their abusive relationships—some even multiple times, as they were involved in consecutive abusive relationships. It was a revelation for me to see trauma and resilience together in a new paradigm and to understand how resiliency enables individuals to cope with trauma (Wilson & Drozdek, 2004). All my life I focused on my victim position, either wallowing in self-pity or carrying the burden of my failed relationship. Rarely did I think

about the strength and power I displayed in escaping my ex-husband with limited resources and support. Despite all social barriers and stigma, I stood my ground against all efforts to reconcile and against fear of a lonely and stigmatized future in a highly patriarchal society. I got a glimpse into human strength in times of adversity (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) through my dialogue with the coresearchers and our shared reflections and learning. It was also during a training session on yoga for people with trauma that I came to recognize that trauma and resilience are deeply intertwined. I started to feel that something really deep was being uncovered; I was beginning to honor my strength and perseverance. I could feel this strength come from various aspects of the research, such as labeling my past experiences, reclaiming my voice, listening and sharing with coresearchers, and writing. Writing about traumatic personal events brings healing (Hussain, 2010). It allowed me to integrate different identities or selves (Etherington, 2001) and to heal.

Committing to Community Work

Three years later, I can still hear Shanice's voice:

> You need to write, not because it is a fad to publish a book [after a doctorate], but because you cannot listen to all women in abusive relationships; your book can reach those in shelters, prisons, and homes. It will give them hope, as they will know stories of women who have found strength to move out of abuse.

Indeed, I had been reluctant to write, but Shanice's words were a wake-up call, making me assume responsibility towards the coresearchers and the larger community of the women in abusive relationships. Although I had engaged in extensive journaling throughout both my dissertation and heuristic inquiry study, I rarely wrote for sharing. This paper appears to be the beginning of my writing about my IPV experience for the public, which in itself is a deeply empowering and therapeutic process.

Shazia, one of the coresearchers, taught me how to take a personal struggle and turn it into a commitment for community work. She had two horrific abusive relationships that spanned continents and decades until she obtained asylum in the United States. Nonetheless, she built an accomplished career and a home for her two sons and herself with little resources. Today, she is actively engaged with women in similar situations and has received governmental recognition for her contributions. For these coresearchers, individual empowerment transformed into "supporting the empowerment of others in their community" (McWhirter, 1991, p. 224). Although I was aware of numerous heroic stories of personal trauma transforming into community, it was through my dissertation that I experienced a transformation. During my dissertation defense, I broke down when asked about my personal learning, because for the first time I acknowledged and accepted the power of transformation. My past trauma was no longer just about pain; it had become my research and a shared purpose.

Creative Synthesis: My Story through Coresearchers' Narratives

Creative synthesis is the final phase of heuristic inquiry, wherein the researcher presents the new understanding of the phenomenon as a whole (Moustakas, 1990). The researcher can express the understanding creatively through a variety of forms, including a story, poem, painting, work of art, or narrative. It is process through which the researcher's experiences, intuition, new learning, and transformation are expressed as a whole at that point in time, knowing well that personal development is a lifelong process. I present my story through coresearchers' narratives that captured my transformation that helped me heal and find peace

through better understanding of myself and the experiences of others with similar experiences (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). To this end, I weave my story through narratives of the coresearchers that triggered reflection, provoked me to see the hidden, and nagged me to explore the unknown and to be receptive to discover the new. This approach is also an attempt to capture the coresearchers' individual and powerful voices and their relationship to the phenomenon of IPV (Anderson, 2000). Through the following expression, I recognize the contributions and role of coresearchers in my journey of self-discovery and healing. All coresearchers were extremely forthcoming in allowing me to be a part of their lives to witness their darkest history, in some cases sharing experiences of shame and guilt with me that they had never shared with anyone else. I am and will remain forever grateful to the coresearchers for their honesty, trust, and faith in the study and in me. I am conscious that I have inevitably made some interpretations as I selected specific quotes over others, but with no intention to undermine other narratives or the whole. I hope to handle their experiences and narratives with the deepest respect and gratitude. All coresearchers and their partners and family members were given a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality.

> A little bit before we got married is when arguing really increased, and I think the first time he hit me was before the wedding; I can't remember. I treated it as an isolated incident, but when I look back I can see the possessiveness, the tactics to isolate me and all of that from my friends and family. I can see all that clearly, which I didn't see then. (Shanice)

> He would say things like, "Oh, you could never do that." I was thinking of opening a business. He was like, "You don't know anything about that" or downplaying me, downplaying me in things I was interested in. And it started to become where I was afraid of saying anything or doing anything because I was afraid he would lose it, just like have a meltdown. (Mia)

> He [ex-husband] hit me once, I don't know, twice. . . . I wasn't brought up in this environment at all, and I always thought I could help him change. I still did. . . . Just know that I let it happen, and I don't know why but I did. (Florencia)

> I didn't want to tell, didn't want to admit to having this failed marriage because God forbid I fail anything. . . . I am the older sister, and I have always been very independent. And I got this [IPV relationship]—I can handle this. They [parents] put a lot of pressure on me to be perfect when I was young. I was trying to be the perfect daughter, and so I lived my entire life to this day, 40 years old, . . . and am still trying to be the perfect daughter. (Kiara)

> I would walk away from that [abusive conversation] feeling very, very bad about myself and having my self-esteem totally ripped apart and not even know why. . . . I felt I had to obey him in those arenas [social scenarios], I guess. . . . I don't think I would have used the word back then. (Melissa)

> Home is crazy and friends and family and everybody else kind of see me for who I am and to him I am some kind of enemy. I mean, we are in the same house; my enemy shouldn't be in my same house? If I face life out there, then why am I coming home to fight life right here? (Shanice)

It's almost like I walk through these doors [work] and am confident, smart, and ready to go and can manage the workday without a problem. [I] walk in the house, [and] it was like doubt and fear and second guessing and not sure. His [ex-husband's] control was pretty intense and without me even knowing it until therapy helped me see it. (Kiara)

It was like I was living two lives, because he [ex-partner] really didn't interact with, he was very antisocial because he was very sick. He just was . . . he would hide in the room. If any yogis [colleagues from yoga] came over, he was very antisocial. . . . I love people, but also the same time I can be alone for days and be completely happy. They both suited me fine, but I didn't realize how I missed people until I was so happy being around people. (Mia)

I get eggs on my face [laughs]. He [ex-husband] threw eggs at me [laughs]. Actually, when it happened he was so angry, and the moment he did that he was like a 7-year-old child, and I think I might have laughed. . . . And I laughed and then got serious, "You just threw eggs at me!." . . I just remember the difference from feeling ashamed. Before I was feeling that I was doing something wrong and the change is—the problem is coming from him. And realizing that the problem was him. (Angela)

It is kind of crazy. At work I had a lot of power; I basically make a lot of the decisions for the school. I have all the purchasing powers. I do all the research; I am the one that manages the budgets. So, I know what our spending power is. I have hiring power. I sit on the board, . . . and my decision-making process makes perfect sense [laughs]. . . . [It] was completely the opposite of that home [laughs]. At home I second-guessed everything that I did. I wonder: If I do this, is that going to make him upset? (Kiara)

I started realizing: "Oh, okay, it is probably not good for me; how can someone treat me like this?" Then I cannot serve [at work] properly because it is a big drain of energy, and also seeing other people support me, . . . seeing others in their relationships and realizing, "Oh, my relationship doesn't have to be this way." (Alicia)

So, definitely self-worth is very wrapped up in work. . . . Somehow work was enough of a space where I could still act normally and still do my job and deal with all of the shit but not have everything completely fall apart. My personal life had fallen apart, my home life had fallen apart; work never did, and school never did. (Melissa)

It was wonderful to see that kind of authentic, meaningful effect, because I think so often we design programs and we are really not sure if it is going to inspire real change. To feel that your work is actually being used for good and it is actually affecting people's lives in positive ways. (Nancy)

[I am] a resource to other women who [are] maybe going through [IPV], to be a voice for them. I'm constantly talking about it, 'cuz I don't know who in my circle, in my church, in my sorority, in my circle of friends might be going through it. (Shanice)

Through the *creative synthesis*, I share my personal story as it appears to me at the end of this research, well aware that as I continue to transform, so will my understanding of this phenomenon. I am mindful to present the above story through the coresearchers' narratives for individual readers to make meaning as suitable to their lives and perspectives. However, for the purpose of sharing my final understanding of this inquiry, currently I am in the process of embracing my IPV survivor identity as an integral part of my identity, just like the broken pottery joined with gold to form a new version of itself (Kintsugi). Although I personally do not subscribe to the view of human identity as broken, Kintsugi is a metaphor that best connects to me as a potter. Through this process, I have begun to connect with my resiliency and passion to actively research this topic and work with the larger community of IPV survivors. Most importantly, this newfound voice (and courage to write about my IPV survivor identity) is empowering me to connect with others who have had similar experiences—in a way connecting me to a collective voice of other IPV survivors.

An Invitation to Encourage Research Driven by Personal Experiences

Despite numerous stories of personal transformation through research, I wonder why some professors are reluctant to support students to undertake studies based on their personal lives. Why is there fear of personal bias or lack of rigor when students embark on such studies? I was discouraged by some professors and continue to face colleagues who challenge the rigor of my work. Despite caution of lack of researcher responsibility or rigorous research (Frick, 1990), heuristic inquiry is a "very demanding process" (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010, p. 1585). This methodology requires researchers to have a strong grasp on the philosophical underpinnings of heuristic methodology (Creswell, 1998) and a rigorous validation process (Dijuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). Heuristic inquiry is common in the fields of psychology and counseling (Moustakas, 1990) and is believed to result in both personal and professional development (Etherington, 2004). Also, heuristic inquiry lends itself to a transdisciplinary inquiry, as it effortlessly moves across diverse topics, institutions, and experiences (Kenny, 2012; Moustakas, 1990; Nowotny, 2003). However, fields such as management have yet to embrace this methodology wholeheartedly. When more dissertations based on personal experiences are encouraged, published in wide-ranging journals, and discussed at different conferences, we will begin to realize the value of research based on personal experiences.

Both practitioners and academics continue to strive to link theory and practice. Despite ongoing efforts across disciplines, it remains a challenge to explore more fundamental (Carr, 1980) and innovative approaches that are integral to both theory and practice. One such way is to foster research of personal experiences, as bell hooks (1994) articulated: "When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice" (p. 61). Similarly, heuristic inquiry not just transforms the individual undertaking it but also has a powerful impact on others (Moustakas, 1990), empowering the researcher, coresearchers and communities!

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Author Note

Dr. Smita Kumar is an adjunct faculty at Business Schools, in the department of Organizational Behavior and Human Resources Management and an independent researcher. Her research interests include work and empowerment, work-family spillover, intimate partner violence in women, work identity and researcher self-care in emotionally demanding studies. She is passionate about multidisciplinary research at the intersection of work, family and social issues and to bring research into day-to-day lives in a meaningful way. In addition, Smita has over 12 years of work experience in international Human Resources across Asia and Europe. She also volunteers across diverse social issues such as homelessness, skill building in NGOs and as a yoga teacher in community centers and schools. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: smitak@gwmail.gwu.edu.

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